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SUBJECT: MEDIA AND THE ELECTIONS: THE DEBATES AND THE ADS

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reason: 1.4 (d).

Summary

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¶1. (C) The fifteen days of debates that precede the December 2 Duma elections kicked off on November 6 and will wrap on November 30. On most days, a shifting mix of political parties participate in three debates that are broadcast on three separate channels. President Putin's United Russia (YR) party has opted out of the process, depriving the other, struggling parties of the chance to boost ratings by sparring directly with the party of power. The absence of YR, the viewer-hostile broadcast times, and a popular lack of interest in an election drama whose ending is already a foregone conclusion have kept viewers away from their sets. Still, the debates, and the ads that accompany them, have been more interesting than expected, especially since the Union of Right Forces (SPS) decided it had nothing to lose by using the live broadcasts to launch an unprecedented electronic media attack on Putin (septel). End summary.

Format

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¶2. (U) The series of debates that precede the December 2 Duma elections began November 6 and will end November 30. Government-owned television stations "First Channel," "RTR," and "TV Center" have, in accordance with the law, provided qualifying parties with the legally-mandated amount of free airtime. "RTR" and "TV Center" have broadcast live, uncensored debates, while "First Channel" has pre-recorded its telecasts. The debates have generally taken place three times per day: at 7:05 a.m., 5:45 p.m., and 11:05 p.m. Each session lasts about forty minutes, and features two - four parties represented by one or two of their representatives. The debates are moderated by an anchor from the respective station. The formats vary slightly, but generally allow each party representative to make an opening statement, take questions from the moderator and opposing party representatives, and finish with a closing statement. Some of the formats have themes: foreign policy or national defense/security, but the debaters in practice frequently stray far from the ostensible subject. The parties' advertisements are shown free-of-charge during the commercial breaks and at the end of each debate. (Parties can buy additional airtime, but it is prohibitively expensive for the bulk of the eleven parties participating in the campaign.)

Flavor of The Debates

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¶3. (C) The decision of Putin's United Russia (YR) party to sit out the debates caused commentators to predict that they would be a listless prelude to an election that was already a foregone conclusion. A number of the debates have, in fact, been perfunctory, but that has been more the product of the

personalities participating, then the absence of YR. Most have been surprisingly lively. The November 7 early evening RTR broadcast, for example, marked the debate debut of Union of Right Forces (SPS) Federal troika number two Boris Nemtsov. Nemtsov, according to media reports, won the agreement of his Communist Party (KPRF) colleagues to focus their fire on the absent YR instead of each other. As Nemtsov told KPRF representative Svetlana Savitskaya "the debates are designed to have us sling mud at each other while (YR) remains pure as the driven snow." Just Russia (SR) participant, Chairman Sergey Mironov, was left to criticize YR while protecting Putin, whom his party supports. Nemtsov, in an attempt to call Mironov's bluff, asked how he managed to "love" Putin while hating YR. Mironov's reply: that he loves only women; Putin gets his respect, has been added to the catalogue of Mironovisms that the campaign has produced.

14. (SBU) SPS Chairman Nikita Belykh continued Nemtsov's line on November 11, terming the "Putin Plan" that forms the core of YR's platform a "dead end." Not as able a debater as Nemtsov and not as charismatic, Belykh was frequently on the defensive. The most frequent charges made by his KPRF and Democratic Party of Russia opponents were that SPS's populist campaign themes and sudden radicalization (septel) were a betrayal of the party's electorate.

15. (SBU) On November 13, Nemtsov, the LDPR's Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, and Patriots of Russia Chairman Gennadiy Semigin turned their attention to defense and national security. Nemtsov again set the tone by terming corruption, not the United States, China, or the European Union, the chief threat to Russia's national security. He alleged that massive Ministry of Defense spending had produced little new military hardware ("only three airplanes"), little improvement in military housing, and an experiment "sabotaged

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by our generals" to form a professional military. Nemtsov's line was enthusiastically adopted by Zhirinovskiy, until Nemtsov reminded the LDPR Chairman that, as a Duma Deputy, he had voted for many of the programs that had produced such poor results.

16. (SBU) Sparks flew again on the evening of November 14, when Zhirinovskiy, SR candidate Oksana Dmitrieva, Civic Forces's Mikhail Barshevskiy and their seconds dueled. Zhirinovskiy, who had been comparatively subdued in his earlier appearances, was his trademark outrageous self. Much of his fire was saved for Dmitrieva who, in Zhirinovskiy's telling, had moved to SR in order to preserve her Duma privileges. Barshevskiy agreed that SR was a "mixed salad," whose members were united only by their interest in a seat in the Duma. Zhirinovskiy refused to let the other candidates speak, a tactic that prompted Barshevskiy's second to tell the LDPR leader, "you're intelligent; why do you talk such nonsense everytime you're in front of a camera?"

The Commentators

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17. (SBU) The comparatively lively debate has won few fans among commentators, who appear to have concluded with YR's refusal to participate that the forum was unworthy of attention. The national daily Vedomosti in a November 8 editorial suggested that a debate about ideas would make sense if YR were not guaranteed a crushing victory on December 2. The national daily Nezavisimaya Gazeta complained that the limited air time allotted made it impossible for a serious discussion on any issue to evolve. Zhirinovskiy himself argued in the press that parties represented in the Duma should have been separated from those that "no one has heard of." Asked about the debates during a November 13 meeting, Mercator President Dmitriy Oreshkin wordlessly pushed across the table a copy of an article on the subject he had written for the weekly magazine Ogonek. The article complained about the same, old faces --Nemtsov, Yavlinsky,

Zyuganov, Zhirinovskiy, Savitskaya-- noting that the only new development was the ten kilograms Yabloko's Sergey Mitrokhin has gained since the last election. The absence of YR, Oreshkin observed, meant there could be no winners, only losers.

The Voters

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¶ 8. (SBU) The commentators' boredom seems to be shared by the voters, who have stayed away from the debates in droves. TNS Gallup Media reported that only 16 - 20 percent of viewers watching television at times when the debates were broadcast had bothered to tune in: about 1.5 percent of the total Russian television audience. Half of the audience watching the news program "Good Morning" at 7:00 a.m. flee when the debate begins at 7:05. The audience share in Moscow, where interest in politics is traditionally higher, has also been quite low: the RTR debates have been watched to date by an average 9 - 10 percent of the capital's viewers.

¶ 9. (SBU) Apathy is in part traceable to the viewer-unfriendly broadcast times of the debates; in 2003 they were prime time material (6:30 p.m. - 9:00 p.m.). But the more likely source of voter indifference is, as the President of the National Association of Television and Radio Broadcasters Eduard Sagalaev has noted, "the complete lack of suspense" in the campaign.

The Ads

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¶ 10. (SBU) The political ads have been no less interesting than the debates. They reflect both the ideological convictions and the financial resources of their sponsoring parties. As one would expect, YR has produced a steady series of slick confections; ads that alternate testimonies to the wisdom of Vladimir Putin by teachers, steel workers, farmers, and pop stars like Alla Pugacheva with images of a mock ballot that has a check in the box that reads "for Putin." A second such YR ad shuffles images of Russia's military, industrial, and natural resource might with images of the President.

¶ 11. (SBU) SR's ads feature the distinctly untelegenic party chairman Sergey Mironov, note that SR is composed of three parties which united in order to create a just society, crow about the party's 500 thousand members and 32 Duma deputies, profile actresses (Rima Markova) and sports heroes (Yevgeniy Plyushchenko) on the SR list, before briefly describing SR's goal as "socialism in the 21st century," higher pay and pensions, and a progressive income tax.

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¶ 12. (SBU) LDPR's ads concentrate, always, on Zhirinovskiy. The most recent offering shows at great length a tape of Zhirinovskiy in 1991 speaking before a seemingly stupefied Boris Yeltsin. Earlier editions also highlight Zhirinovskiy's oratorical skills.

¶ 13. (SBU) Yabloko's attempts to trump the Zhirinovskiy joker with a Yavlinsky ace seem stale. They feature a weary looking Yavlinsky offering prescriptions for the problems that ail Russia. Bureaucrats? They shouldn't be allowed to dabble in business. Affordable medicine? It should be financed by the budget. The military? End hazing and form a professional military. At the end of the most recent ad, Yavlinsky, noting that Yabloko is the last party --number 11-- listed on the federal ballot, hopefully quotes the Bible that the "last of you shall be first."

¶ 14. (SBU) The Democratic Party of Russia shows Chairman Andrey Bogdanov as the country's leader in year 2020. Russia is an EU member, Russians are living in first class housing, the oligarchs have been jailed by the European Court, St.

Petersburg is an EU cultural capital, and the Russian soccer team has trounced England to win the World Cup. This future, the ad implies, could be yours if you vote for the Democratic Party on December 2, 2007.

¶15. (SBU) The Party of Social Justice, has produced a low-cost black-and-white cartoon that shows a diamond-ringed, fur-coated young oligarch slipping on a watermelon rind as he exits his limo for a nightclub. "Are you okay?" asks a poorly-dressed passer-by. "Yes," says the oligarch. "You won't be," comes the reply.

¶16. (SBU) SPS has by far the most interesting ads, however, and they have increased in their lethality as the debates have progressed. The most recent version features Chairman Nikita Belykh asking viewers, as a Soviet documentary film is screened in the background, if they want a "return to the USSR on December 2." Belykh holds out the prospect of closed borders, no international travel, and property confiscation. He calls the current leadership "dictators," and SPS a "party of civic resistance." The price of oil has doubled in the last eight years, Belykh says. Has your life improved that much? Belykh promises that if SPS comes to power, it will not leave the current Kremlin residents in peace and asks, "What do you want, SPS or KPSS (Communist Party of the Soviet Union)?"

SPS Rhetoric

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¶17. (C) SPS's direct attack ads and more adversarial stance seem to be forcing the other parties participating in the debates to re-examine their rhetoric. Also no doubt playing a role was Putin's own unkind words about United Russia during his mid-week visit to Krasnoyarsk. The November 14 evening debates had Zhirinovskiy attacking Prime Minister Zubkov and his government, as well as YR. In the initial encounters, Zhirinovskiy had confined himself to criticism of the KPRF and SR. Secondary KPRF figures also seem more willing to put their toe into the water now that SPS has proved that Putin, the Kremlin, and YR are not off limits. It is not clear if this trend will be allowed to continue on a national television that until the beginning of the debates had done little but glorify the President and his inner circle, but it is possible that the small audience and the finite number of debates remaining may mean carte blanche for more of the same.

Comment

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¶18. (C) Whether the debates continue in the same tone or not, SPS's sallies against Putin reveal one flaw in the President's succession strategy that some commentators speculated about when he first announced his intention to head YR's list. Even though he has no intention of joining United Russia, and sits in splendid isolation as numbers one, two, and three of YR's federal troika, Putin will have more difficulty playing the role of the good tsar surrounded by bad advisors now that he has entered the rough-and-tumble of party politics, and that may have real consequences for the succession itself.

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